

About



Exploring Emptiness

Sometimes we feel an inner sense of emptiness. When we look within, it seems like nothing is there, so we distract ourselves with something on the outside, like food or television. And yet, these outer distractions take care of the emptiness only temporarily; they capture our attention only temporarily. When the distraction is over, the emptiness returns.

What is it about emptiness that makes us want to move away from it? Is emptiness really a bad sensation? When you consider the literal meaning of emptiness, how can it be a problem? Is it possible for “nothing” to hurt you? Is that sense of emptiness, that empty feeling, actually uncomfortable, or is the restlessness and activity of trying to distract yourself or avoid the emptiness what is uncomfortable?

This is an important distinction. We are so used to assuming that feelings of lack, emptiness, or something missing are a problem that we are uncomfortable when that is our experience. But is the emptiness the source of our discomfort? Or is what we do in response to the emptiness the source of our discomfort, including the stories we tell ourselves and the judgments about the fact that we feel empty?

It's not our fault that we tend to avoid feelings of emptiness. We were taught to do this by everyone around us who was doing it. In fact, there's a good reason to avoid one feeling of emptiness—the feeling of hunger—since we need to eat when we're hungry. However, we often interpret a feeling of lack as a need for food. Have you ever eaten when you weren't hungry to try to distract or relieve yourself from a feeling? It's possible to simply experience the sensations of emptiness or lack and discover that they aren't so bad. Try it and see for yourself:

Exercise: *What happens right now if you just allow any sensation you might have of emptiness, lack, or there not being enough? Are those sensations painful, or are they just sensations? Perhaps there's something in particular that feels lacking: a lack of strength, energy, or self-worth; a lack of excitement or interest; a sense of there not being enough security or safety; or a feeling that right now there's no joy or happiness. And yet, are the sensations that let you know that these things seem to be missing unpleasant? What happens if you just let those sensations be here for a moment?*

It certainly would simplify life if we didn't have to do anything about these feelings of lack. So much of our activity, effort, and inner striving are meant to get us more of what we seem to lack. But what if it's okay to lack something? What if it's okay to just feel empty? What a relief! So much less to do!

Even more surprising is discovering that the sensations of emptiness can be enjoyed. There is a richness to silence, to stillness, to space itself. We overlook the richness of the inner silent spaces in our being. Most of us are quite unfamiliar with them because we've been turning away from them most of our lives. Just as a wine connoisseur can make finer distinctions in the flavor and quality of wine than someone who has only tasted wine a few times, we can become connoisseurs of emptiness.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is when we discover that the very thing that feels lacking in an experience of emptiness is often found in the emptiness itself. For example, if you feel weak or lacking in strength and energy and you stay present to that sensation of weakness or lack, you may notice a deeper, more subtle sense of strength appearing in the emptiness.

The strength, joy, peace, and love that can be found in the empty places within us are much more subtle than the feelings generated from our usual attempts to feel strong, happy, or loving. However, when we focus on the inner strength, joy, peace, or love, the experience of them can become powerful and real in a way that far exceeds our expectations. Who knew that there was a deep reservoir of infinite peace lying under the restless feeling of a lack of peace? What a surprise to find abundant joy in the dry, empty



sense of a lack of excitement and fun?

This principle—that strength, joy, peace, and love can be found inside our feelings of emptiness and lack—is a radical new perspective. But this truth can only be fully known by diving into your experiences of emptiness. Since doing this is so contrary to our conditioning, we have to develop a new habit of paying attention to feelings of emptiness in order to discover the richness waiting there.

This would be easier to do if every time you turned your awareness toward a feeling of emptiness or lack, you were immediately filled with a sense of abundant peace or joy. But the experience of emptiness is many-layered, like an onion. So as you move into a particular feeling of emptiness, you may find a deep sense of strength or love, or you may uncover a deeper layer of conditioning. Initially, the sense of emptiness or lack might get worse. As you allow the feeling of there not being enough or of being inadequate to just be there, painful memories or a strong aversion to the sensation of emptiness may be triggered, which can make it difficult to keep your attention on the emptiness itself. Whenever you're distracted or find yourself avoiding the sense of something lacking, you might miss an opportunity to discover a little more about the nature of that emptiness, including any subtle quality to be found there. A new habit of staying with each new layer of feeling and memory and possibly even stronger sensations of emptiness and incompleteness needs to be developed. There's nothing you can do to make the feelings of peace and joy appear except to stay with your experience, no matter what is showing up, until they do.

Exercise: Notice what you're feeling inside right now. Especially note any sense of emptiness or lack, such as a lack of worthiness, capability, clarity, understanding, or a lack of peace, joy, or love. For now, just allow any sense of lack to be here. Notice how you experience the sense of lack. Where is it located? How big is the empty space? What are the sensations associated with it? Is the emptiness itself uncomfortable, or is it just empty? Keep paying attention to the empty feeling and notice what happens next. Are thoughts or memories arising? Is it easy or hard to stay with the experience you are having? Remember to drop into your Heart or give space to the feelings, as this can help you stay with your experience. Know that whatever arises next is exactly what you need to experience for now. If a painful memory or uncomfortable emotion is triggered, just stay with that as best you can. Notice if there's an even deeper sense of emptiness or lack in each emotion that arises.

If a strong desire or urge to move away or distract yourself arises, just stay with that urge. Again, notice if there's a deeper or bigger sense of emptiness behind or beneath the desire to distract or move away. Especially be curious about the empty spaces or direct sensations of lack that you discover as you stay with your experience. Are the empty spaces painful or just empty? What qualities does the space itself have? Is it moving or still? Does it have a color? Is it clear or foggy? How big or deep is the emptiness?

When your attention is simply on the empty space itself, you may notice something present or moving within the space. What is present in the center of the space where something is lacking? Is there any peace in the emptiness? Is there any joy or happiness? Is there any love? Set aside any expectations of what that peace, joy, or love should look like and just be curious about any that you find. Especially set aside any expectations about how big or strong the feeling should be and just be curious about even the smallest sense of strength, clarity, or peace that is present. Notice what happens as you pay attention to the center of the emptiness. Does the feeling of peace or joy get stronger, or does touching into peace or joy trigger an even deeper longing and sense of lack? Stay with whatever arises for as long as you can. If any strong emotions or desires are stirred up by this exercise, take some time to just rest and settle after you stop exploring. This can be intense and difficult work, and it's important to nurture yourself in the process.

The most surprising and liberating discovery is to find that everything that really matters in life, such as peace, joy, strength, power, clarity, value or worth, support, nourishment, and love, can be found within you—and not just when you're lucky enough to be already experiencing them, but also when it seems like they're absent and have never been there. Once you've discovered them in the sense of lack and incompleteness many times, it becomes possible to relax and know they're always there, no matter what the present moment feels like.

This is the key discovery: Experiences of our true nature come and go like every other experience, but to know that love is here in all its glory even when you're experiencing the absence of it frees us from struggle and suffering. To know that everything you could ever want or need is already here, even when you're experiencing the opposite, frees you from having to have a particular inner or outer experience to be happy. Knowing the true potential of inner space or emptiness means you can trust that everything is fine even if you aren't experiencing any peace, joy, or love. The potential to experience peace, joy, and love is always there.

The love and joy that are experienced can never capture the infinite potential of the source of love and joy within us. Because this peace, love, and joy can never be exhausted, you can just relax and know that they are here, where they can never be lost or used up. Enjoy them while they appear, and enjoy the stillness and spaciousness that remain when there isn't a particular manifestation of Presence, or Being, appearing.

*it is here
in the breath
it is here
in the stillness between breaths*

*it is here
in the active mind
it is here
in the resting mind*

*it is here
in the dream's panorama
it is here
in each moment of awakening*

*it is here
when all is well
it is here
when fear has nothing left to fear*

*even then
there is pure noticing
even then
there is no need for doing*

*no frantic searching can find the obvious
no seeking needed
to find that which seeks*

*it is here
where it can never be lost
or found*

Poem from *Gifts with No Giver: A Love Affair with Truth*, a collection of [nondual spiritual poetry](#) written from the Heart by Nirmala.

(Article is from the free ebook: *That Is That: Essays About True Nature* available [here](#).)